

Partnerships: New Approaches to an Old Idea

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The concept of “partnerships in parks” has received a lot of attention in publications and in conferences and symposia, including the 75th NPS Anniversary Symposium in Vail, Colorado, and the Albany, New York conference, “Partnerships in Parks and Preservation.” The Albany conference produced an interesting and provocative list of partnership characteristics: they require a common vision among partners, involve shared ownership, are an experiment, are a process, require risk taking, are grounded in information and research, mean working together in pursuit of a common goal, involve trust and harmony, are not necessarily easy or efficient but they are effective, and are unique to each area. The idea is not limited to any one kind of park. It appears to have broad application and is taking several forms. While it has the ring of something new, daring, and innovative, it isn’t new. It does, however, continue to be innovative and, sometimes, daring!

National parks have been involved in partnerships since the establishment of Yellowstone in 1872. Legislation for the park authorized the provision of lodging and food for visitors by a non-governmental entity that we now call a concessioner. About 50 years later another kind of service-to-visitor partnership evolved at Yosemite NP in the form of the Yosemite Natural History Association. It marked the beginning of cooperating associations—partners that continue to provide educational materials for parks and other forms of support for interpretation programs.

At least three other forms of partnerships have evolved since the NPS came into being. The first was initiated by Stephen Mather through his efforts to assist the National Conference of State Parks. Mather was interested in both the national park system and a national system of parks. To this end, at the first meeting of the Conference, he committed the NPS to provide technical assistance for the development, promotion, and management of state parks and park systems. Among the technical assistance programs established specifically for cultural resources are the Historic American Buildings Survey and Historic American Engineering Record which have provided assistance to state and local units of government since 1933 and 1969 respectively.

Another form of partnership developed around the idea of sharing responsibility for resources ownership and/or management. It started in 1931 with Canyon de Chelly National Monument which was established without Federal ownership. The NPS was given responsibility for management of the prehistoric resources and the visitors, while the Navajo Tribe retained ownership of all Canyon resources and the right to use those resources as they wished.

The fourth form that emerged involved agreements with local units of government for the provision of various kinds of services to parks including police and fire protection as well as, in some instances, road and sign maintenance and trash collection. Frequently, this partnership arrangement involves areas within or in close proximity to urban areas.

Examples of each of these forms of partnerships exist and continue to function effectively, although, as with current negotiations with concessioners, they can sometimes be contentious. Provision-of-services to visitors remains the most common form and is institutionalized within the national park system. It is the other forms of partnerships, however, that have been the focus of publications and symposia. They have also attracted the attention of NPS administrators, planners, and the Congress as well as state and local interests. And, they should be of particular interest to **cultural** resources planners and managers because, more often than not, cultural resources are a primary component of the areas under consideration.

Cultural resource areas where technical assistance has been an important part of the partnership include, for example: Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, America’s Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Lowell National Historical Park, Salem Project, and Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve. The NPS provides planning assistance in each area. Other kinds of assistance included HABS studies at AIHP, Salem Project, and Lowell NHP and development of design guidelines for new construction and restorations at Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve and Lowell NHP and the Lowell Historical District.

While many partnerships have been specified in Congressional actions, others have been created through the initiatives of area managers, project leaders, and planning team leaders for purposes of communicating with interest groups, facilitating cooperative programming of appropriate educational, interpretive, and cultural activities, and for purposes of being good neighbors. The number and kinds of partnerships existing at various units, and affiliated and project areas varies considerably. There is some indication, however, that successful partnership parks may have many, rather than fewer partners.

Partnerships specified in legislation are frequently formulated via memoranda of understanding or agreement, and through lease agreements and contracts. They may also be, in part, a product of the planning process such as occurred at Ebey’s Landing NHR where, in the absence of specific directives, the NPS planner proposed a land trust which was adopted by the participants in the planning process as an appropriate entity for Reserve management. The NPS is represented by one member on the nine member Trust Board.

Partnerships at San Antonio Missions NHP involve shared resource ownership and management responsibilities as well as services provided by local government. Partners in resource ownership and management include the Archdiocese of San Antonio which retains ownership

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and management responsibility for the interiors of the four mission churches while the NPS has ownership and management responsibility for church exteriors, related structures, and lands. Other partners in resource ownership include the San Antonio River Authority, Bexar County, State of Texas, San Juan Ditch Water Supply Corporation, and City Parks and Recreation Department. Another primary partner is Los Compadres, a friends group that raises funds for priority projects identified by the superintendent and that do not receive Federal support. Additional formal agreements exist with the city for police and fire protection, road construction, and sign maintenance and repair.

Lowell NHP maintains a list of 48 cooperative groups and agencies, 15 of which are considered primary partners. The large number of partners can be explained in part by the urban location of this area and the concomitant need to maintain communications and working relationships with many units of government—city and state, and with numerous interest groups.

The use of advisory commissions has frequently been specified in Congressional actions for partnership areas. Most often, they play a primary role in facilitating communication and cooperation between the park and interested regional and local groups. Notable examples of successful Commissions include those at Cape Cod National Seashore, Lowell NHP and AIHP. The Cape Cod Commission was recently reestablished at local request because of the role it had played previously as an important communications medium between Seashore and surrounding towns, parts of which are within the Seashore boundary and constitute the cultural landscape of the Seashore. The Commission at Lowell NHP is, in addition to being an important communications tie to the community, empowered by Congress to play a decisionmaking

role in implementation of the management plan for the park and the surrounding National Historic District. At AIHP the Commission is an essential device for communications, coordination, and cooperation among nine counties in southwestern Pennsylvania, several Commonwealth agencies, and local governments.

Commission success is related to the appointment of members who are sensitive to the array of local interests and to the issues that must be addressed. An effective commission also presupposes prompt appointment of members and filling of vacancies so as to not disrupt effective functioning. Such has not always been the case. For example, reappointment of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Advisory Commission, after the initial five-year term, was delayed in 1991 by bureaucratic foot-dragging to the point where the mandated deadline for reappointment was passed and Congressional action was required before reappointments could be made.

The characteristics of park partnerships that emerged from the Albany conference included common visions and goals, trust and harmony, and shared ownership. Effective communications and cooperation are essential ingredients of each. Other characteristics mentioned were each partnership is unique and each is an experiment. This suggests there is much to be learned about effective alternatives to the usual emphasis on the NPS having sole responsibility for ownership and management of valued resources. Viewing each partnership as an experiment suggests that these areas should be closely monitored and successes and failures assessed. Learning from experience should contribute to the continued successful evolution of partnerships in parks.

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